Leibniz on eternal punishment

I see that the controversy on the eternal punishments of hell is about to flare up again among our theologians. Let us hope that it can finally be settled and put aside! For the most depressing thing about such disputes is without doubt the fact that they generally achieve nothing, so that twenty or fifty years later, the first zealot or quibbler who comes along thinks he is entitled to reopen the whole issue.

To avoid becoming like one of those scribblers, it is essential first of all to study the history of the disputed doctrine in all its ramifications. Only when we know exactly where each of our predecessors dropped his thread can we hope to pick them all up again and, by comparing their different directions, set off on that path to truth which has been lost or never discovered in the first place. And if these predecessors include men like *Leibniz*, what can possibly be more instructive than to follow every trace of their footsteps and take our bearings from there?

Nothing more is necessary, I think, to introduce the following few lines, hitherto unpublished, of that great man who, if I had my way, would not have written a single line in vain. The facts of the matter can perhaps best be described in the words of Mosheim – especially since this affords an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of these words and to furnish them with a literary commentary.

When Mosheim published his own relevant work in 1725, at the end of the first part of his *Sacred Addresses*,[1] he prefaced it with the following explanation:

[1] Johann Lorenz Mosheim, *Heilige Reden über wichtige Wahrheiten der christlichen Religion* [*Sacred Addresses on Important Truths of Christianity*] (1725); Lessing refers to the second edition, which

I have been asked to set down the appended thoughts on the doctrine of those who regard the punishments of hell as finite. Others have written more extensively and with greater learning on this matter, and I can well understand if my work is regarded as superfluous. The innocent haste of some of my friends to have it printed without my knowledge – and not entirely accurately – led me to promise them, when I heard of their plan, to supervise the publication myself. I now fulfil this agreement. And what is culpable about that? Would I not be just as blameworthy if I failed to keep my word as I am in keeping it? It is ultimately better to give the world too much rather than too little printed matter on such questions. And the more influence this doctrine has on certain truths of faith concerning the basis of salvation, the more one has cause to marshal the evidence in its support. On such occasions, it is always customary to appeal to reason. And many of the most famous men take the view that the cause of those who defend eternal punishment would be all but lost if one relied on reason alone. I take the opposite view, without therefore despising those who think otherwise. It seems to me that reason gives at least as much support, if not more, to those who defend the eternity of divine retribution as to those who regard it as finite. Certain human opinions of which the majority approves often pass for clear and indisputable laws of reason. And the justice of the divine court of judgement is often measured against the usual practice of human tribunals. The most acute arguments in favour of the finite punishment of the damned are those of a man who, though otherwise learned, is accused of having fallen in his latter years into the pernicious errors of the Socinians.[2] I have studied his comments closely and can testify that their author is a man of no mean intelligence. But if one removes certain ambiguities and denies that conclusions derived from human affairs are applicable to those of the divinity, the so-called proof becomes a phantom in which one looks in vain for any coherence. I have long intended to expound the history of the doctrine in question in a Latin treatise, and not only to discover its sources, but also to explore the various ways in which it has been given colour and

contains the passage which he proceeds to quote here, from Mosheim's introduction to his own appended 'Thoughts on the Doctrine that the Pains of Hell are Finite'.

[2] Followers of Lelio Sozzini (1525–62) and Fausto Sozzini (1539–1604), Unitarians who denied the Trinity, and consequently the divinity of Christ.

> substance. A large number of other works, some of which will not be unfamiliar, have hitherto prevented me from completing this project. Perhaps I shall soon find a few hours in which to put the accumulated stock of ideas and testimonies in order and present them to the public.

The identity of the learned man who furnished the most acute arguments to date for the negative view is indicated by Mosheim himself in the appended title of the work in question, namely Ernst Soner's *Demonstratio Theologica et Philosophica, quod aeterna impiorum supplicia, non arguant Dei justitiam, sed injustitiam*.[3] He adds:

> The illustrious Leibniz planned to publish this little work, which is very rare. I have before me a copy which already has the preface which he intended to print along with it. I shall have occasion to say more about this in another context, and at the same time to acknowledge the kindness of the person to whom I am indebted for this and other related materials.

Unfortunately, Mosheim never found the opportunity he promised to his readers, and which he doubtless hoped would arise in that Latin treatise in which he intended to review the history of the contentious doctrine. But just as that work was never completed, so also did Leibniz's aforementioned preface to Soner's *Demonstration* remain hidden and almost entirely forgotten. For since 1737, when Ludovici, in his *History of the Leibnizian Philosophy* (Pt II, p. 27),[4] reminded Mosheim of his promise, I am not aware that it has been mentioned by anyone other than those dry bibliographers (for example Vogt, *Cat. libr. rar.*, p. 635)[5] who refer to it in connection with Soner's work on account of the latter's rarity. Not even Brucker mentions it, although he had an excellent opportunity

[3] [*A Theological and Philosophical Demonstration that the Eternal Punishments of the Godless Indicate not Justice, but Injustice on the Part of God*]. Ernst Soner or Sonner (1572–1612), Professor of Medicine at Altdorf, held Socinian views.

[4] Lessing's reference is to Karl Günther Ludovici, *Ausführlicher Entwurf einer vollständigen Historie der leibnizischen Philosophie* [*Circumstantial Draft of a Comprehensive History of the Leibnizian Philosophy*] (1737).

[5] Johann Vogt, *Catalogus historico-criticus librorum rariorum* [*Historico-Critical Catalogue of Rare Books*] (1747; earlier edition, 1732).

to do so in recounting Soner's services to Aristotelian philosophy (*Hist. cr. Phil.*, Vol. IV, Pt I, p. 312).[6] We should therefore not be in the least surprised that it has not been included in the new edition of Leibniz's collected works which we owe to M. Dutens,[7] given that Germany at large has been so very remiss in supporting the efforts of this worthy foreigner. Instead of competing to provide him with as many unpublished additions as could possibly be found, his informants did not even draw his attention to all of Leibniz's previously published essays. For as a foreigner, Dutens naturally could not be aware of them all himself, and the honest Brucker could not single-handedly supply him with an exhaustive list. But since the reason for this failure may simply have been that each German scholar feared that another scholar might have forestalled him, it is much less disturbing than the dead silence of our reviewers on the subject. Did they really know of no omissions in this collected edition? Nothing which might at least have deserved a brief mention?

But more of this on another occasion, for I do not wish now to stray too far from the subject which prompted the above censure. – In short, that preface which Leibniz wrote to Soner's work, which Mosheim had and which he intended to publish but then failed to do so, is what I here propose to make known from our library's resources.

So as not to overlook the manner in which it came into our library, I should mention that Mosheim himself appears to have received it from that source. At any rate, the person whose kindness he intended to acknowledge on another occasion was the then librarian Hertel.[8] But since Hertel had regularly associated with Leibniz and was himself keenly interested in rare and heterodox items, it is equally possible that he lent the preface to Mosheim, together with Soner's work, from his own literary collection, with which it subsequently passed into the library's holdings after his death. This seems to me all the more likely because a copy of Mosheim's reflections as well as a letter in his hand to Hertel is attached to it. The copy corresponds exactly to the later printed version, and I

[6] Johann Jakob Brucker, *Historia critica philosophiae* [*Critical History of Philosophy*] (1742–4).
[7] G. W. Leibniz, *Opera omnia* [*Complete Works*], edited by Louis Dutens, 6 vols. (1768).
[8] Lorenz Hertel, a predecessor of Lessing as Wolfenbüttel Librarian, who held office from 1705 to 1737.

shall quote the letter in full in a footnote.[a] Without further preamble, let me now introduce the reader to the main item.

Leibniz's preface

> That work of Ernst Soner, once a highly respected philosopher in Altdorf, which he described as a theological etc. demonstration of the injustice of eternal punishment, is praised by some as supposedly irrefutable. It is all the more harmful because few have actually seen it, for people tend to place a high value on whatever they do not know. I therefore think that it is often useful to publish works of this kind, which need only be read in order to refute or dispose of this received opinion which has been handed down for so long a time. It certainly cannot be denied that Soner wrote in a subtle and ingenious manner; but his demonstration suffers from a major omission, which I shall briefly describe lest any incautious reader should be deceived by his specious argument, which can be summarised as follows. Sins are finite, and the finite and the infinite are incommensurable. Therefore punishments must also be finite. He further attempts to show that sins are finite by rejecting the senses in which they can be understood as infinite, and he lists these senses as follows. 'If the misdemeanours of the godless are supposed to be infinite or to be considered as such, then they acquire this infinite character either from within themselves or from the perpetrator, or

[a] 'With renewed and respectful thanks for the trouble you have recently taken on my account, I enclose my own reflections, together with Soner's objections concerning eternal punishment. Although the latter are sophistically enough contrived, one can quite easily settle the issue with this honest man by following his own principles. His basic assumption is that God's only form of justice is that he has to keep his own promises; in all other respects, his power is limitless. Very well! It then clearly follows that God's justice does not prevent him from imposing eternal punishment on the godless, for his power permits him to do so. The whole argument will therefore depend on whether, in the Scriptures, God really did threaten the godless with eternal punishment. But if this is so, the honest Socinian must lose, and the odds are ten to one against him. I would write more if time permitted. But I have to attend a disputation in two days' time, and I must complete my other lecture courses before Easter. I therefore have hardly a free moment, and I must devote those which I do have to [my translation of] Hales.[9] My reflections on the conduct of the fathers of Dordrecht [the Synod of Dort] will hardly please those who subscribe to that Synod's doctrines. I nevertheless base them on clear facts and rational propositions. I am, as ever, etc. Mosheim.'

[9] John Hales (1584–1656), English theologian; Mosheim refers to his own translation of Hales's *De auctoritate concilii Dordraceni paci sacrali noxia* [*On the Resolutions of the Synod of Dort as Prejudicial to Ecclesiastical Peace*], which criticised the Synod of Dort (1618–19) as excessively biassed in favour of radical Calvinism.

from those on and against whom the offence is perpetrated, and either from some of those persons or from all of them simultaneously. But they cannot be infinite, or be considered as such, in any of these senses. Yet apart from these, there is no other possible sense in which they can be infinite, or be described as such. Therefore they are not infinite at all.'

What the theologians usually reply to this argument, which is based on the relation between crimes and punishments, can best be read in their own works. In the present context, I would prefer to indicate another flaw in Soner's argument, namely his incomplete list of the senses in which something can be described as infinite. For sins can be described as infinite not just in relation to the object which is sinned against, i.e. God, or in relation to the type of sin or its degree of intensity or the other senses to which the author refers, but also in relation to their number. Thus, even if we should ourselves concede that no sin is infinite in itself, it can certainly be argued that the sins of the damned are infinite in number, because they persist in sin throughout all eternity. It is therefore just that, if the sins are eternal, the punishments should also be eternal. For evil men condemn themselves, as wise men rightly say, because they remain forever impenitent and turn away from God. God cannot therefore be held responsible, or accused of disproportionate severity in relation to the sin in question.

That is all there is to this so-called preface. I hope I shall not be expected to include Soner's work as well. Admittedly, it is still just as scarce, as a printed book, as it was in Leibniz's time, for I am not aware that it has ever been reprinted. But its content no longer has the merit which it may once have possessed for those who favoured free enquiry in matters of faith, for since then, it has been reproduced in a hundred books to which everyone has access. And since it has become easier, in recent times, for supporters of apocatastasis[10] in particular to state their views as openly as they please, they and those who respond to them have no less frequently defended or opposed the doctrine of finite punishment of the damned (which is clearly implicit in the doctrine of apocatastasis) with all kinds of argument – and, indeed, with all kinds of zeal and fanaticism. In short, Soner's demonstration, apart perhaps from one or two niceties, is now a spent force.

[10] The extension of God's kingdom (i.e. the Christian faith) throughout the earth, and (according to Origen) the restoration of all souls to their original purity; see Matthew 19.28; also Acts 3.21 and 2 Peter 3.7–13.

But could and should I not, it may be thought, for this very reason have left Leibniz's preface in similar obscurity? For what he says there in reply to Soner is equally familiar nowadays, because he himself has said the same thing in other contexts. – I am well aware of this. But my intention in publishing it has less to do with the defence of truth than with its defender, with the attitudes and reasons which underlay his defence; for both of these have been misinterpreted and misrepresented.

Mosheim himself, who was certainly in a good position to know the real content of Leibniz's preface, still gives readers a completely false impression of it. When he first mentioned it,[b] he did so in such general terms that the good Pagenkopen[11] imagined that, since Leibniz had intended to publish Soner's demonstration, he must have approved of it. In order to enlighten him on this matter, Mosheim wrote in reply:[c]

> Herr von Leibniz did not propose to publish this material because he regarded it as important and accepted Soner's opinion. He wished rather to furnish it with a preface, now in my hands, in which he refutes Soner himself with the help of Aristotle's principles, and exposes the weakness of his proofs. His plan was to show the world the inadequacy of a work which was regarded as irrefutable merely because it was rare and known to few people.

But if Mosheim initially said too little, he now obviously says too much, and his opponents had reason to suspect that he was deliberately seeking to misuse Leibniz's authority. For we now have Leibniz's preface before us, and one must be able to read a great deal out of very little in order to find everything that Mosheim claims to have found in it. So Leibniz refuted Soner with the help of Aristotle's principles? He exposed the weakness of his proofs? His proofs? Are then his proofs the sole dilemma? And what exactly were those Aristotelian principles? I can as little discover them in Leibniz's preface as I can in Soner's work itself, which Mosheim likewise says is related to Aristotle's principles. The only Aristotelian element in Soner's work is that it is expressed throughout in

[b] In the preface to Part I of his *Sacred Addresses*, as already noted [see note 1 above].

[c] In the epistle on various matters at the end of Part II of his *Sacred Addresses* [see note 1 above].

[11] Pagenkopen (biographical details unknown), author of *Gründliche Erklärung der ewigen Liebe Gottes in Christo, gegen alle gefallene Creaturen, oder ausführlicher Beweis, daß die Lehre von der Wiederbringung aller Dinge in der Natur und Schrift unumstößlich gegründet* [*Thorough Explanation of God's Eternal Love in Christ towards All Fallen Creatures, or Circumstantial Proof that the Doctrine of Apocatastasis is Incontrovertibly Grounded in Nature and Scripture*] (1726).

terms of scholastic deductions. But the premises of these deductions are merely commonsense propositions, and certainly not doctrines peculiar to Aristotle. So even if Soner's dilemma does lose its force as a result of Leibniz's comment, this is surely accomplished without any assistance from Aristotle. But with or without this assistance, is it really true in the first place that this one comment by Leibniz is so powerful and decisive? To be frank, I am totally unconvinced. For even if it were undeniable that human sins can, or indeed must, become infinite in number, what did this one further possible kind of infinity matter to Soner? What need did he have to concern himself with it? And against whom did he have to do so? Even if some of his adversaries did recognise this infinity, did they therefore recognise it as the most important, or even the sole, basis of their doctrine? Would they therefore cease to maintain what Soner actually denies – namely that, even if there were no infinity of sins such as that described above, the purely finite sins of this life are nevertheless subject to eternal punishment? And that even one of these sins merits this eternal punishment? Leibniz's objection in fact alters the whole point at issue. For Soner was concerned only with the sins of this life, which can only be finite in number. But Leibniz wants him to take account of the sins of our future life as well, which would in themselves merit perpetual punishment if their own duration were necessarily perpetual.

It may well be that, on further reflection, Leibniz himself could not deny this fact, and for that reason withheld the entire preface. For once it was written, why else would he not have published it? One cannot at any rate argue that he nevertheless made essentially the same point many years later in another context, namely in his *Theodicy*,[12] for in another context, the same idea can have a completely different significance. What Leibniz had recognised on the first occasion as an invalid rebuttal he could now quite properly use as an additional means of elucidating another question. Its original aim had been to refute all of Soner's objections and to provide a basis for the disputed doctrine, and it was quite inadequate for this purpose. But now, in the *Theodicy*, where he could assume as already demonstrated what he could not prove by this means alone, it was merely designed to establish a more direct connection between the greatest physical evil whose existence he was obliged to admit in his best

[12] *Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal* [*Essays on Theodicy, on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*] (1710), Leibniz's main exposition of his philosophical optimism.

of possible worlds, and the evil of human guilt – but without any reference to the infinity of the object of this guilt, because this infinity could not be treated as part of the [finite] universe.

And that would be all I needed to add, had I not discovered one of our most recent writers working along the same lines. Herr Eberhard, in his *Apology for Socrates*[13] – an in many ways excellent book, in which he examines the doctrine of the salvation of the heathens – has also thought it necessary to include the doctrine of eternal punishment in his investigation. Now I have a very specific reason for wishing that he had not opposed the latter doctrine – not, at least, in an apology for Socrates. This alone, however, would scarcely have led me to permit myself the least criticism of his work, had he not at the same time – since his topic also drew his attention to Leibniz's comments on the subject – raised various objections to that philosopher and to the comments in question, objections which I have such good reason to consider in the present context. I shall say what I have to say as briefly as possible, and if I do not put my thoughts into proper order, I shall at least number them.

I. I shall begin with the general judgement which Herr Eberhard passes on Leibniz with regard to his attitude towards accepted articles of religion. For after touching on that proof of eternal punishment referred to above, he shows very well that it cannot take us beyond the limits of mere possibility, and continues:

> The most perceptive advocates of this view, such as Leibniz, were well aware that a proof of this kind does not extend any further. Thus Leibniz was arguing only in support of those who had already been convinced by Scripture of the real eternity of the pains of hell. Since he was so anxious to make his philosophy universally acceptable, he tried to adapt it to the dominant principles of all parties and to show that it was agreeable and advantageous to the opinions of them all, in order to secure their approval. He took their doctrines as given and attributed a tolerable sense to them, thereby reconciling them with his system, but without subscribing to them himself.

Does this judgement not make our philosopher seem a little too vain? Does it not render his attitudes towards religion in general more suspect

[13] Johann August Eberhard, Berlin clergyman and author of *Neue Apologie des Sokrates oder Untersuchung der Lehre von der Seligkeit der Heiden* [*New Apology for Socrates, or An Examination of the Doctrine of the Salvation of the Heathen*], the first volume of which had recently appeared (1772).

than is good for religion itself? It is quite certain that neither of these conclusions was intended by Herr Eberhard. But it cannot be denied that, on this occasion, he did not express himself throughout as felicitously and precisely as he usually does. For however biassed in favour of his own philosophy we may think, or wish to think, Leibniz was, we really cannot say that he tried to adapt it to the dominant principles of all parties. How could he possibly have done so? How could it have entered his mind, to quote an old proverb, to make a dress for the moon? Everything that he did from time to time in the interest of his system was quite the opposite: he tried to adapt the dominant principles of all parties to that system. Unless I am much mistaken, the two are very far from identical. In his quest for truth, Leibniz never took any notice of accepted opinions; but in the firm belief that no opinion can be accepted unless it is in a certain respect, or in a certain sense true, he was often so accommodating as to turn the opinion over and over until he was able to bring that certain respect to light, and to make that certain sense comprehensible. He struck fire from stones, but he did not conceal his own fire in them. But that is basically all that Herr Eberhard intended to say, and part of his statement actually does say it: 'He took their doctrines as given, and attributed a tolerable sense to them, thereby reconciling them with his system.' Very good; but Herr Eberhard ought not to have added: 'but without subscribing to them himself'. For Leibniz did indeed subscribe to them, namely in that tolerable sense which he did not so much attibute to them as discover in them. That tolerable sense was truth, and how could he not subscribe to truth? Besides, he should not be accused either of falsehood or of vanity for so doing. He did no more and no less than what all the ancient philosophers used to do in their *exoteric* pronouncements. He displayed a sagacity which our most recent philosophers have, of course, become far too wise to employ. He willingly set his own system aside, and tried to lead each individual along the path to truth on which he found him.

II. Herr Eberhard continues:

> This is obviously the case with the present proof. In order to make his best of possible worlds acceptable to those who believe in the eternal torments of hell, he sought to demonstrate that these, too, can be reconciled with his propositions on the best of possible worlds and with his notions of divine justice.

Let us not forget what kind of a proof this is. It is that which deduces the endless duration of punishments from the perpetual continuation of sin. But what connection does this proof have with the doctrine of the best of possible worlds? How can it make this doctrine acceptable to those who believe in the eternity of the torments of hell even without this proof? Do these eternal torments cease to constitute an objection to the best of possible worlds because they are just? Whether just or unjust, they in both cases attribute infinite consequences to evil, and it was against these consequences, not against their injustice, that Leibniz ought to have defended his best of possible worlds. And he did so defend it – not, however, by means of the proof in question, but by an entirely different expedient. For if this same objection to his best of possible worlds on the grounds of eternal torment gained additional strength from the fact that the actual number of those condemned for ever must become immeasurably greater than the number of those saved, what did he say in reply? Merely, perhaps, that the vastly greater numbers of damned individuals were rightfully damned? What benefit would he have gained for his best of possible worlds from this conclusion, which is in any case self-evident if the theory is otherwise correct? Instead, he took both propositions – the eternal damnation of the majority of mankind, and the justice of their damnation – as fully established, and simply denied the corollary by showing what an infinitely small part of the world the whole of mankind is, and how, in the universal city of God, evil nevertheless counts as virtually nothing in comparison with the good (*Theodicy*, Pt I, §19). And that, I suggest, does mean making the doctrine of the best of possible worlds acceptable even to those who believe in the eternal torments of hell. But the thought from which this eternity is deduced was merely intended to cast more light on the working of God's justice. This alone is true in Herr Eberhard's statement. But I confess that I cannot see why he says that this involved only Leibniz's *own* notions of divine justice. It is bad enough that the doctrine of the best of possible worlds continues to be called *his* doctrine; but why should the only true notions of divine justice also be described as *his* notions?

III. Herr Eberhard further adds: 'He [Leibniz] accepts eternal torments only conditionally, and shows that they contain no injustice if we assume that the transgressions are also eternal.' I know the passage in the *Theodicy* where Leibniz says precisely that (*Theodicy*, Pt II, §133). But he would

scarcely have acquiesced if this had been taken to imply that he therefore completely rejected everything else that theologians usually adduce in support of eternal punishment. He is so far from doing so that he is in fact more than at one with them on the most important point at issue. What I mean is that he does not merely allow this point to stand on its merits or demerits, but actually defends it with great perspicacity. Herr Eberhard declares that the one and only end which God can and must pursue in his punishments is the correction of those whom he punishes. Leibniz, on the other hand, not only extends this correction to those who merely witness the punishment, even if it has no effect on those who are themselves punished; he also speaks very seriously in support of a purely retributive divine justice, whose intention is neither to correct, to set an example, 'nor even to make restitution for evil'. And he bases this justice not just on the divine threat identified by the theologians, but on a genuine appropriateness, a certain indemnification of the understanding.[d] Nor does he anywhere reject, or even disapprove of, the proposition that sin receives infinite punishment because it offends an infinite being. He does indeed say on one occasion that there was once a time 'when he had not yet examined this proposition sufficiently to pass judgement on it' (*Theodicy*, Pt III, §266). But I find no evidence that he passed judgement on it later, no doubt because he realised, once he had examined it sufficiently, that it is not possible to reach any conclusion on it. For if that retributive justice really does pertain to God, what finite intellect can define its limits? Who can presume to decide what criterion it has to adopt in imposing these punishments, and what it cannot adopt? The criterion of its own infinity is at least as probable as any other.

IV. But what is the point of all this? Do I wish to increase the suspicion that Leibniz merely pretended to be orthodox? Or do I wish in all seriousness, to the annoyance of our philosophers, to make him orthodox? I wish neither of these things. I admit that Leibniz treated the doctrine of eternal damnation very *exoterically*, and that he would have expressed himself quite differently *esoterically*. But I would certainly not wish anyone to see in this anything more than a difference in teaching methods. I would

[d] 'The end of this kind of justice is neither to correct, to set an example, nor even to make restitution for evil . . . Hobbes and some others do not recognise this punitive justice, which is actually retributive . . . But it is always based on a relation of appropriateness, which satisfies not only the offended party but also discerning observers, just as fine music or good architecture satisfies cultivated minds' (*Theodicy*, Pt I, §73).

certainly not wish anyone to accuse him outright of internal ambivalence with regard to this doctrine – that is, by publicly paying it lip-service while secretly and fundamentally denying it. For that would be going too far, and it could not possibly be excused by any didactic strategy or by a desire to become all things to all men. On the contrary, I am convinced – and I believe that I can prove it – that Leibniz did not object to the ordinary doctrine of damnation, with all its exoteric reasons, and would even have preferred to reinforce it with new reasons, simply because he realised that it was in closer agreement than the opposite doctrine with a major truth of his esoteric philosophy. Of course he did not interpret it in the crude and dismal sense which some theologians attach to it. But he found that there was more truth even in this crude and dismal sense than in the equally crude and dismal notions of the fanatical adherents of apocatastasis; and this alone impelled him rather to go a little too far with the orthodox than not far enough with the latter.

V. Herr Eberhard certainly does not share this view of Leibniz and his esoteric philosophy. He believes that its main principle, that of the best possible world, becomes fully convincing only if one assumes that all rational beings will eventually attain happiness. In his own words:

> Leibniz was undoubtedly conscious of this, and despite the fact that, as I have already noted, he even tried to accommodate his philosophy to the opposite view, he still gave clear indications that he disapproved of it. One of his most able pupils and defenders (Vattel)[14] does not hesitate to acknowledge this. Besides, a more merciful fate for sinners is too deeply ingrained in his principles (provided one understands their full force and extent, and has explored their innermost secrets) for these to be accepted and the former rejected. He recognises no immobility or rest in the universe; everything, down to the smallest particle, is in constant movement, with a tendency to greater expansion. He obviously prefers this growth to uniform perfection, whether this growth is explained by the ordinates of the *hyperbola* or of the *triangle* (letter to M. Bourguet, *Opera omnia*, Pt II, p. 332).[15]

[14] Emmerich de Vattel, *Défense du système Leibnitien contre les objections de Mr. Crousaz* [*Defence of the Leibnizian System against the Objections of Mr Crousaz*] (1741).

[15] The geometrical terms here and in the following paragraph are those used by Leibniz to illustrate different hypotheses concerning the perfection of the universe. The hyperbola, a curve whose branches both tend towards infinity, denotes infinite progress towards perfection without a beginning; the triangle denotes infinite progress with a beginning; and the rectangle denotes equal perfection with neither a beginning nor an end.

With due respect to Herr Eberhard, I must point out that, although he is not entirely wrong with regard to this last reason drawn from Leibniz's philosophy, he is certainly quite mistaken with regard to the passage cited in his note. What Leibniz actually says is 'I do not yet see any means of showing by demonstration which of them one should choose in accordance with pure reason.' Herr Eberhard apparently takes this to refer to the two hypotheses for explaining the ever-increasing perfection of the whole, by the ordinates of either the hyperbola or the triangle. But it plainly refers to the two general hypotheses which postulate either an ever-increasing perfection or an ever equal perfection of the whole.[e] Now if Leibniz himself, in the year 1715, did not yet see any means of demonstrating either the one or the other from irrefutable principles, how can one say that he nevertheless obviously preferred the former? His system did not in the least oblige him to declare his preference for one or the other; it remains exactly the same on either assumption, and he said of both until the end of his life[16] that he did not yet see which of the two he definitely had to accept. For just as he elucidates the theory of ever-increasing perfection – whether or not one assumes a first beginning – either by the hypothesis of the hyperbola or by that of the triangle, he elucidates the theory of ever equal perfection by means of the rectangle. Of all these three hypotheses taken together, he says expressly in a different letter from that cited by Herr Eberhard: 'Thus it is not so easy to decide between the three hypotheses, and much further reflection is needed to reach a conclusion.' He also says in yet another letter:

> As for the grand question of whether it is possible to demonstrate by reason which hypothesis – viz. of the rectangle, the triangle, or the hyperbola – is preferable in explaining the constitution of the universe, I believe that one must adhere to a rigorous form of logical reasoning. For since, in metaphysics, one does not have the advantage

[e] Here is the passage in its full context: 'One can form two hypotheses – the first that nature is always equally perfect, and the second that it is always growing in perfection. If it is always equally perfect, though subject to variation, it is more probable that there is no beginning. But if it is always growing in perfection (assuming that it was not possible to give it the whole of perfection simultaneously), the matter might again be explained in two ways, namely by the ordinates either of the hyperbola or of the triangle. On the hypothesis of the hyperbola, there would be no beginning, and the moments or conditions of the universe would have grown in perfection from all eternity; but on the hypothesis of the triangle, there would have been a beginning. The hypothesis of equal perfection would be that of the rectangle. I do not yet see any means of showing by demonstration which of them one should choose in accordance with pure reason.'

[16] Leibniz died on 14 November 1716.

> of the mathematicians who can define ideas by means of figures, one must make up for it by rigorous reasoning, which can scarcely be attained in such matters except by observing the form of logic. – I would therefore ask you, Sir, to consider how you might reduce your reasonings on this subject to an appropriate form, because I do not yet see a way of doing so myself.

As already noted, he wrote all this in 1715 – that is, at the end of his career – in letters which contain his final commentary on his system. That is why these letters to M. Bourguet, which first appeared in Dutens's edition of the complete works, are one of this edition's most valuable assets.

VI. But if Herr Eberhard did not mean his words to be taken so literally, and only wished to say that, although Leibniz could not properly demonstrate any of the relevant hypotheses, he nevertheless had a marked preference for that of constant progress towards greater perfection, I must admit that I cannot concur with him here either. Leibniz seems to me rather to have been much more favourably disposed towards ever equal perfection, and indeed almost to have persuaded his friend to supply a formal demonstration of it, which he perhaps had reasons for eliciting from him rather than simply putting it into his mouth. I base this comment particularly on that passage where he writes:

> You are right, Sir, in saying that it does not follow from the fact that finite beings are infinite in number that their system must acquire from the start all the perfection of which it is capable. For if this conclusion were correct, the hypothesis of the rectangle would be demonstrated.

It in fact seems to me that, even if this conclusion is not necessary but only possible, the hypothesis of the rectangle has already gained a great advantage, because the whole could then at every moment have that perfection which, according to the other hypothesis, it merely approaches constantly without ever reaching it; and I do not see why it should not for that very reason have struck the eternal wisdom as the more attractive choice. Leibniz, however, not only admits the possibility that the infinite number of finite beings could have been placed from the very beginning in the most perfect combination of which they are capable, but actually defends it against the accusation of eternal sameness; he does so by showing that, even if the degree of total perfection remained the same, the individual perfections would constantly change.

VII. But even supposing that all this were not as I say, and that Herr Eberhard's assertion that Leibniz obviously preferred incessant growth to uniform perfection were undeniably true, would he not at least be stretching quite excessively the meaning which Leibniz attached to this growth? For Leibniz would surely have understood this growth as applying only to the general conditions of the whole, yet Herr Eberhard extends it to all individual beings. But even if the latter were also in constant movement towards greater expansion, I should like to know how sin could ever occur at all among moral beings, unless sin itself were nothing but a movement towards greater expansion. No, that is certainly not how Leibniz thought. For when, in accordance with the hypothesis of uniform perfection, he says of a particular state of the whole 'this collection can have perfection as a whole, *although the individual things of which it is composed may increase or diminish in perfection*', this certainly also applies to every state of the whole under the hypothesis of perpetual growth. The whole may continue in the same degree of perfection, or grow in perfection at every moment, but in neither case are individual beings prevented from increasing or decreasing in perfection. Without this possible decrease in perfection, sin among moral beings is inexplicable; and no more than this possible decrease is required, even in the system of ever-growing perfection, to explain the punishment, indeed the eternal punishment, of sin.

VIII. But I must first of all draw attention to that great esoteric truth itself in whose interest Leibniz found it helpful to speak on behalf of the common doctrine of eternal damnation. And what else can that truth be but the fruitful proposition that nothing in the world is isolated, nothing is without consequences, and nothing is without eternal consequences? Thus if no sin is without consequences either, and these consequences are the punishments of sin, how can these punishments be anything but eternal in duration? How can these consequences ever cease to have consequences? Herr Eberhard himself acknowledges their eternity in this respect, and comments on it with all possible forcefulness and dignity:

> If eternal hell is nothing but this eternal harm which is said to attach to us from every act of sin, no one will be more willing than I to grasp this opinion with both hands. For the sake of the end itself, I shall gladly overlook all the misconceptions to which this expression might be subject. I shall endeavour with all the zeal and all the eloquence that God has given me to impress on people's minds that

> all immorality has infinite evil consequences, and that each backward step we take on the road to perfection will be subtracted, throughout our entire eternal existence, from the sum of that perfection and from the distance we have already covered.

All well and good! But how did he come to think that Baumgarten[17] alone had hinted at this eternity of punishment? How did he come to award to Baumgarten alone the distinction of having coupled it with so true and great a significance? Does it not also follow from Leibnizian principles? And even in Baumgarten's case, does it rest on any other principles than those of Leibniz? As for the proposition from which Baumgarten directly deduces it – namely that no negative thing can be a ground for reality in a real thing – what else is this but a more useful formulation, in certain instances, of the principle of sufficient reason? – Not to mention the fact that not only the eternal duration of damnation follows from this proposition, but also the impossibility of passing from damnation through damnation to salvation.

IX. But if the eternity of punishments is so obviously based on undoubted Leibnizian doctrines, it must also be compatible with both hypotheses of universal perfection, whether equal or growing, if Leibniz's whole system is, as I have said, indifferent to these hypotheses. And it really is indifferent to them, provided that neither kind of perfection is attributed to each individual being, but only to the total states of all beings collectively. Irrespective of which hypothesis is adopted, a moral being can not only stop short or take several backward steps in its progress towards perfection: on the contrary, I do not see why it *might* not even persist eternally in this retrogression, and move further and further away from its perfection. On this possibility rests the exoteric reason which Leibniz employs in deriving the eternal duration of damnation from the endless continuation of sin – except that, if he were to be completely orthodox, he ought to have deduced from it not just eternal damnation, but also an eternal damnation which grows throughout eternity.

X. Humanity certainly shudders at this thought, even if it refers to no more than a possibility. But I do not therefore wish to raise the question of why one should frighten people with a mere possibility, because I fear

[17] Eberhard's reference (*Neue Apologie*, p. 427) is to Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Metaphysica* (1739; fourth edition, Halle, 1757), §791.

I might be asked in reply 'Why not frighten them with it if it can really only be frightening to someone who was never serious about mending his ways?' But supposing that not even this possibility existed, and that, although it might be compatible with the perfection of the whole, the eternal regression of a moral being were internally contradictory, the eternity of punishments nevertheless remains wholly consistent with the strictest Leibnizian principles. It is enough that no delay along the road to perfection can ever be made up in all eternity, and it therefore punishes itself throughout all eternity by its own agency. For even assuming that the supreme being cannot possibly administer punishment other than to correct the punished individual, and even assuming that this correction is sooner or later a necessary consequence of the punishment, is it therefore certain that any punishment can ever act as a corrective unless it last eternally? It may be replied 'Of course – through the vivid memory which it leaves behind.' But is this vivid memory not also a punishment?

XI. But why dwell on things which no one denies? It is not the eternity of natural punishments which is denied, but – what then? – the eternity of hell. But are the two not identical? Or is hell something different from, or at any rate more than, the quintessence of those punishments? – I am fully aware that there are theologians who take this view. But I find that Herr Eberhard at least is not among them, and that he is not for that reason any less orthodox than they. For there is nothing in all religion which compels us to believe such a thing. On the contrary, one can and may assume with every confidence that the punishments of which Scripture warns us are none other than the natural ones which would follow from sin, even without this threat. But if the higher wisdom considered that such extraordinary threats were necessary in addition, it recognised that it was also salutary to express them purely in terms of our present sensibilities. And here, I think, we come to the source of all the difficulties which have impelled people to deny eternal damnation. For since Scripture, in order to convey the liveliest impression of the misery which awaits the depraved, has taken nearly all its images from physical pain – with which all human beings, without exception, are most familiar –, people have interpreted if not physical pain itself, then at least its character and relation to our nature, not as an image, but as the thing itself; and on the basis of this misconception, they have denied something which is in every respect better founded. Thus punishments have become torments,

torments have become a condition of torment, and our awareness of this condition has become an exclusive sensation permeating our entire being. In short, that *intensive* infinity which – tacitly or implicitly, and to a greater or lesser degree – people have unthinkingly attributed, or even felt obliged to attribute, to the punishments of hell has no basis in either reason or Scripture; and it is this intensive infinity which makes, has always made, and must necessarily make the infinite duration of these punishments so incomprehensible, so incompatible with the goodness and justice of God, and so repellent to our understanding and sensibility.

XII. And it *must* make this impression, especially on those who cannot conceive of any divine punishments which do not aim at correction. Their feeling is fully justified, but their understanding draws a false conclusion. It is not the infinite duration of punishments which rules out correction, but their intensive infinity. For the main feature of this intensive infinity is its unremitting quality, and it is this unremitting quality which makes all correction impossible. What I mean to say – and have said in part already – is that if the punishments are to be corrective, the perpetual duration of the physical evil they inflict is so far from impeding the correction that the correction is actually a product of this duration. But the sensation of this enduring evil must not be unremitting – or at least, its unremitting quality must not always be dominant – because it is inconceivable how the initial resolve to improve could ever arise under such circumstances. Herr Eberhard himself affirms the former possibility explicitly and no less emphatically: 'The physical aspect of punishment may last indefinitely, but the better informed sinner will no longer call it an evil; he will no longer consider himself unfortunate, however painful it may be to his sensuous nature.' What else does this mean but that the sinner can better himself, even if his punishment never ceases? But when could he even begin to think that the enduring physical evil might be a salutary evil for him, and when could he begin to be better informed, if the sensation of this evil were as intensive and unremitting as people believe is implied by some figurative expressions of Scripture?

XIII. I deliberately say 'by *some* figurative expressions'. For other such expressions, especially if we may include the parables among them, yield far more accurate notions which are compatible both with the endlessness of punishments and with the correction of the punished individual. That the two are not mutually exclusive is evident not just on the assumption

that the correction can only be sustained if the punishments continue to operate: that it is more than probable can also be demonstrated by another means – namely if we bear in mind that, although punishment and reward will and must be positive factors, a condition of punishments and a condition of rewards are also relative concepts which remain the same so long as they decrease or grow in equal proportion. The rich man in hell may better himself; he may even, from the first moment when he felt his punishment, have turned once more towards his perfection and drawn ever closer to it with every succeeding moment. Does he therefore cease to remain in hell in comparison with Lazarus,[18] who, from the first moment when he felt his salvation, has meanwhile hastened on by an equal number of steps towards ever higher perfection? – Anyone who can seriously object that, in this way, heaven and hell flow into one so that every sinner can console himself with the thought that he will sooner or later reach heaven is precisely the kind of person with whom one should not begin to discuss such matters. Let him continue to cling to the letter alone, for it was for him and his kind that the letter was intended.

XIV. I may, however, ask a man like Herr Eberhard whether that unbroken progression which links the two conditions, heaven and hell, through infinite stages, without either of them ever losing its relative designation, does not already follow from the system of corrective punishments. And similarly, whether the complete distinction which the ordinary understanding makes between heaven and hell, with their boundaries which form no boundary and their abruptly demarcated limits which are supposedly separated by I know not what gulf of emptiness, on one side of which there is absolutely nothing but one kind of sentiments and on the other absolutely nothing but sentiments of a different kind – whether all such things are not far more unphilosophical than the very crudest notion of everlasting punishments can ever be. The latter, at least, is based on a great and undisputed truth, and it only becomes so nonsensically crude because it is made to include those absurdities which conflict both with the nature of the soul and with the justice of God.

XV. That they conflict with the nature of the soul is clear, because the soul is not capable of any pure sentiment – that is, of any sentiment which is capable of being, even in its smallest elements, exclusively pleasant or

[18] See Luke 16.22–31.

exclusively unpleasant – let alone of a state in which it experiences nothing but such pure sentiments of the one kind or the other. But that they also conflict with the justice of God is, I fear, something which may have received less consideration than it deserves. Yet what does such a conflict more obviously signify than the assumption or assertion that even the justice of God cannot, in its punishments, escape an imperfection which, in certain cases, is inevitable in human justice? This imperfection consists in the fact that human justice, when punishments and rewards overlap, can only reward by a reduced punishment and punish by a reduced reward – in other words, it must, in such cases, punish and reward, as the expression goes, in a single package. But does this also apply to God? Never! On the contrary, if it is true that the best human being still has much evil and the worst is not devoid of all good, the consequences of evil must follow the former into heaven, and the consequences of good must also accompany the latter into hell: each must find his hell even in heaven, and his heaven even in hell. The consequences of evil must not simply be subtracted from the more numerous consequences of good, or the consequences of good from the more numerous consequences of evil; instead, each of them must, in its whole positive nature, express itself independently. Nothing else is meant by Scripture itself when it refers to the stages of heaven and hell. But do the more unthinking of its readers also imagine these stages in this way? Or do they not rather give each one of these stages, however low it may be, so to speak its own intensive infinity? They of course recognise that the lowest stage of heaven is only the lowest one; but it is nevertheless heaven, nothing but joy and bliss, nothing but blessedness.

XVI. And so, why should we not rather turn our weapons against these erroneous notions, which are also far easier to eliminate from Scripture by means of reinterpretation than the eternal duration of punishments? It seems to me at least that even the most acute interpreter, if he tries to oppose the latter, must take as established certain things which remain open to many objections. For example, when Herr Eberhard insists that the word 'eternal', in the Hebrew and Greek languages, denotes merely an indefinite but by no means infinite duration, he says, among other things:

> One must take particular note of the chronological progression in the gradual elevation of so abstract a concept as that of eternity. This concept was not always so transcendental as the staunchest efforts of the most sublime philosophy have finally made it.

The reminder which this passage contains may apply very appropriately to many metaphysical concepts, but hardly to that of eternity. Since it is purely negative, I fail to see what kind of gradation is possible within it. Either it was not present at all, or it was present all along as completely as it ever can be. The fact that it was customary to describe a long and indefinite time as an eternity does not remotely prove that eternity was also at first envisaged only as a long and indefinite time. For the word is still used every day in the former sense by people who know very well what the word 'eternity' really means. And it is even less true that, although the poverty of early language could only express the abstract concept of eternity by piling one age on top of another, the concept itself ever lacked its essential character. The history of philosophy suggests the very opposite. For even if this concept of eternity does represent a special effort of the most sublime philosophy, philosophy was certainly capable of such an effort at a very early stage, and this most sublime philosophy is none other than the oldest philosophy of all. Even the most transcendent level which this concept of eternity is capable of reaching (I refer to the exclusion of all temporality), and to which so few are able to raise themselves even now – even this was already very familiar to the ancient philosophers, and as already noted, almost more familiar to them than to our philosophers of today.

XVII. I am equally reluctant to associate myself with various other pronouncements of Herr Eberhard on this matter, for without addressing the essential point at issue, they nevertheless present it in a false light. This is true of his suggestion, which is clearly implied even if it is not directly asserted, that the doctrine of eternal punishment originated with the Christians. He says:

> I am admittedly not in a position to specify the precise moment when it arose and spread among the Christians. But whenever it was, it must have been at a time when barbarism had already gained sufficient ground for the sophistry of the schoolmen to find ready access to the minds of men. For I hope to prove so conclusively that reason rejects this terrible doctrine that they will have no option but to put it down to misunderstandings of Scriptural passages.

As already noted, even if he does not deny, in these words, that other religions besides Christianity teach, and have taught, the eternal punishment of sinners, his formulation is not entirely blameless if those unfamiliar with the question gain the impression that it is not, and never has been, taught

by any other. This is nevertheless so mistaken that he would find it difficult to name even one religion which clearly teaches that punishments are finite, and does not in fact teach the opposite in terms no less severe than those which, as he must admit, seem at least to be used in the Scriptures. Thus, each Christian convert brought the offending doctrine with him from his former religion into Christianity, and did not need to be introduced to it by the misunderstood passages of Scripture, which could at most reinforce his existing belief. It would, on the other hand, be much easier to specify the moment when, in Christianity, a doctrine so common to all religions first began to be contested, partly on supposedly philosophical grounds and partly on the basis of prior misunderstandings on the part of those involved. And this consensus of all religions would alone prevent me from agreeing with Herr Eberhard 'that reason rejects this terrible doctrine', or, as he says even more emphatically on another occasion, 'that reason cannot be blamed for this doctrine, that there is not one among the whole range of rational truths from which it can properly be deduced'. What all religions have in common can surely not lack a basis in reason; and the truth of the eternal consequences of sin, albeit obscurely felt rather than clearly recognised since time immemorial, was undoubtedly enough to generate the doctrine in question. Or rather, this truth and the doctrine of eternal punishment are basically one, although they are more or less distorted in the various religions by the attempt to represent these punishments in sensuous terms.

XVIII. I shall conclude by indicating more precisely the reason, mentioned near the beginning of this work, why I could wish that Herr Eberhard had not opposed the doctrine of the eternal punishment of sinners – not, at least, in an apology for Socrates. It is because Socrates himself believed in all seriousness in such eternal punishment, at least to the extent of considering it helpful to teach it in the most unexceptionable and explicit terms. He does so in his speech at the end of Plato's *Gorgias*, in which the following passage leaves absolutely no room for doubt:[19]

> And it is fitting that every one under punishment rightly inflicted on him by another should either be made better and profit thereby, or serve as an example to the rest, that others seeing the sufferings

[19] Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias*, with an English translation by W. R. M. Lamb, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA and London, 1925), p. 525.

> he endures may in fear amend themselves. Those who are benefited by the punishment they get from gods and men are they who have committed remediable offences; but still it is through bitter throes of pain that they receive their benefit both here and in the nether world; for in no other way can there be a riddance of iniquity. But of those who have done extreme wrong and, as a result of such crimes, have become incurable, of those are the examples made; no longer are they profited at all themselves, since they are incurable, but others are profited who behold them undergoing for their transgressions the greatest, sharpest, and most fearful sufferings evermore, actually hung up as examples there in the infernal dungeon, a spectacle and a lesson to such of the wrongdoers as arrive from time to time.

No evasions are possible here. The 'evermore' (τὸν ἀεὶ χρόνον) is not as ambiguous as αἰὼν or αἰώνιος.[20] And what would it matter if there were an ambiguity, given the explicit contrast between the damned who suffer punishments and torments for the purpose of correction, and the damned who cannot better themselves but are tortured and tormented eternally simply as an example to others, suffering 'the greatest, sharpest, and most fearful sufferings evermore'? It is true, of course – at least on this evidence – that Socrates did not treat the punishments of hell, in general and without distinction, as eternal. But if this alone makes his doctrine more tolerable, what is there in our religion to prevent us from making the same distinction? To prevent us? As if the greater part of our fellow-Christians had not already adopted it! That intermediate state [of purgatory] which the older Church believes in and teaches, and which our reformers, despite the grievous abuse it had occasioned, ought not perhaps to have rejected so completely – what else is it but the corrective hell of Socrates? And even if it were merely possible, and indeed remained merely possible for all eternity, that there might be utterly incorrigible sinners who could never desist from sinning, why should we not assume or accept merely possible punishments for these merely possible monsters alone? –

– O my friends, why should we try to appear more sharp-witted than Leibniz, and more philanthropic than Socrates?

[20] These terms can mean either 'eternity' and 'eternal' or 'a long time' and 'long lasting'.